

The First Two Pages: “Last Call”

By Gemma Clarke

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The idea for ‘Last Call’ came from a horrifying news story, the kind I can’t help but read despite knowing it’ll keep me awake at night. I began writing it as I begin writing most crime fiction, as a means of working through my own anxiety and exercising the illusion of control by manipulating the outcome.

I wanted to take this horrifying story and change the ending. I’m tired of existing in a culture steeped in relentless misogyny, by the effortless way with which we dispose of women in both fact and fiction. But I went in partially blind, beginning the first two pages with the ghost of a news story and a feeling in my gut. With hindsight, I recognize that feeling was a burning desire to take fictional revenge on crappy men.

Scott, the crappiest of men, materialized pretty quickly. I had a vision of a guy sitting in a fancy restaurant, slurping oysters with his mistress while a long-suffering wife pondered his whereabouts. So far, so tropey. Then I wondered what might happen if she called him for a chat while he dined. I like the imagery that comes with smartphones, how we attach photos to contacts and never bother to change them; when somebody we love calls us we see a different version of them, frozen in time and long since changed. I wanted to use that.

The photo that appeared when his wife called was from the distant past. She stood under the shade of a palm tree in a red bikini, smiling at him. The sight of it always loosened something in his chest.

This seemed an apt metaphor for Scott's marriage, for the way he viewed his wife: as a still image, inanimate and there to service his needs. The red bikini encapsulates the way Scott sees women as a whole, purely in terms of sexual currency and outward appearance. He finds his wife attractive in the photo, hence it setting his feelings loose, his memories of desiring her. But as a complex, flawed, three-dimensional person she is no longer exciting to him.

In telling the story in close third from Scott's perspective, I made the decision not to name Scott's wife. Scott's mistress, Karina, is bestowed with a name and an identity because she is new and exciting to him—fresh territory to conquer—while his wife is simply referred to as his wife. But even Karina holds very limited appeal for Scott beyond the sensual:

Bare shoulders, the shimmer of youthful skin. He was a lucky man. He let her talk as they ate—about her difficult mother, a friend's bridal shower in Florida, a tempestuous ex-boyfriend, about countless other things. He liked to watch her lips move.

I wanted to describe Scott's appearance, but it felt natural to reveal it in a rare moment of unguarded self-reflection as he catches of himself in the mirror. For a moment, he sees himself as Karina might see him, and it is a glimpse into what makes Scott tick: a gaping chasm of insecurity, fear of aging and self-loathing beneath the Lothario's veneer.

When she got up to use the restroom, he startled at the sight of his reflection in the mirrored wall behind her. He looked too old, too eager, a middle-aged man with thinning white hair.

Then he returns to posturing, putting his façade up again:

He sat up straighter, raised his chin and folded his face into a look of nonchalance. He wanted to seem a little less desperate when she returned.

Finally, I wondered what might happen if I upped the stakes, had his wife call him again in a panic. It's clear from the call that she's filled with anxiety at being home alone, while he's too distracted by the prospect of extramarital sex to register that she's actually in danger.

“You think I'm overreacting,” his wife said through the phone.

“No, no.” He was trying to figure out a quick way to hang up.

“I think that was smart.”

I wanted his blitheness towards his wife to have consequences, for his desperation to preserve his façade to be his undoing.

Cruel, perhaps. But, I think we can all agree: Scott had it coming.

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Gemma Clarke writes about soccer and crime, that time-worn combination. She is currently writing *Soccer Women* for Nation Books, a collection of essays about the icons of women's soccer. Back in her native England, she wrote about soccer for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *London Evening Standard*. She is a graduate of Jonathan Santlofer's Crime Fiction Academy at the Center for Fiction. “Last Call” is her first published short story.